DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 291 270 HE 021 104

AUTHOR Howard-Vital, Michelle R.
TITLE Black Women in Higher Education: Struggling To Gain Visibility.
PUB DATE [87]
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Students; *Black Teachers; College Faculty; *College Students; *Females; Higher Education; Research Needs; Scholarship; *Women Faculty

ABSTRACT

Recent research on black women in higher education is reviewed, and implications of the research are addressed. Topics include: historical trends in the education of black women, the experiences of black women as they pursue degrees, the stereotypic image of black women, the backgrounds of black women pursuing traditional and nontraditional careers, enrollment trends of black women in higher education, institutions' responses to the black movement and the women's movement, the role of professional black women in higher education, the percentage of black faculty at white institutions, the responsibilities of black faculty, and the status of black women administrators versus black male administrators. It is concluded that there is a need for more research and theoretical constructs by and about black women in higher education. It is suggested that there has been a lack of scholarly interest in the study of black women in higher education and research perspectives about this group have frequently been androcentric and/or ethnocentric. Twenty-eight references are cited. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Michelle R. Howard-Vital
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED291270

Black Women in Higher Education: STRUGGLING TO GAIN VISIBILITY

by
Michelle R. Howard-Vital, Ph.D.
Chicago State University

An examination of recent research on black women in higher education demonstrates that the subject apparently is of little interest to those writing and researching in mainstream academia. This is not unlike the interest, or lack of interest, apparent in the larger American society. Thus, it is not surprising that there is not a great deal of research on black women in higher education. Yet, there is a current and developing body of research on black women in higher eduction which provides groundwork for realizing the history, dispelling myths, relating experiences, formulating theoretical frameworks, and establishing the identity of black women in higher education (and the larger social structure).

Why is there a lack of research about black women in higher education?

In the introduction to their anthology of writings on black women's studies, All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave, Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (1982) affirm that the intellectual void surrounding black women is totally related to the politics of a white-male society. This society does not recognize, and denies,

HE 021 104

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
✓ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

the importance of black women's lives and contributions through racial, sexual, and class oppression. Hull, Scott and Smith call for an examination of the lives and experience of ordinary, as well as, exceptional black women from a pro-women, feminist perspective to encourage the expansion of black women studies as a field inquiry. The authors hope that this examination would provide analytical frameworks for understanding black women as a group and for generating insightful recommendations for promoting policy. Patricia Bell Scott, (1982) in "De-bunking Sapphire: Toward a Non-Racist and Non-Sexist Social Science," decries the narrow interpretation of the experiences of black women. She states:

> One is almost overwhelmed with the depth and extent of the intellectual void that exists among social science scholars concerning the life experiences of black women. . . Despite the fact that black women have always played important roles in American society, they have been almost totally ignored by students of American society and human behavior. The experiences of black women in both a historical and contemporary sense have been examined from a problems framework. As a result of this approach, the student begins to see the experiences of black women as being limited in nature... (85)

Althea Smith and Abigail J. Stewart, editors of a special 1983 issue of Journal of Social Issues, reiterate the concerns discussed in Some Of Us Are Brave. They assert that researchers

have only recently begun to recognize and study unique characteristics of black males and black females. Agreeing with Hull, Scott and Smith, the authors add that many studies that have purported to study blacks only studied black males, and similarly studies that focused on women examined white females. Smith and Stewart conclude that the neglect of scholars to study the black woman demonstrates, "our inability to view contextual interactions that are pivotal to defining commonalities and differences between racism and sexism" (12).

But what does the developing research inform us about black women in higher education as they enter institutions as undergraduates, pursue graduate degrees, and seek faculty and administrative positions?

Linda Perkins (1983) in "the Impact of the Cult of True Womanhood" provides a concise, comparative historical analysis of the education of black and white women beginning with the antebellum period. Perkins's analysis reveals that as early as 1837 black women were encouraged to get an education for "race uplift." It was thought that black women could then aid with the improvement of the black race. Perkins's analysis provides a good framework from which to review and analyze the early contributions of educated black women, to view the development of sexism among educated blacks, and to examine the development of career choices among black women.

The research of Elsie Smith, Jacqueline Fleming, Ann Burlew, and Constance Carroll provides more insight into the experiences of black women as they pursue degrees in institutions of higher education. After examing the available research on the aspirations and career goals for black females in high school, Elsie Smith (1982) finds that, at the high school level, black females tend to have higher scholastic achievement and career aspirations than black males. The educational and occupational aspirations of black females, however, appear to decline in college with the females manifesting the effects of sex-role stereotyping in occupational and educational choices.

Jacqueline Fleming (1983) in a study in which she examines the stereotypic image of black women as assertive and dominant, finds that even if black women have a slight educational advantage (over black men) when entering college, black men dominate with more advanced degrees, elite professions and higher incomes. (However, if the increase of black women earning doctorates continues as reported by the College Board, this might change). After examining the effects of college type (either predominately black or white) on the social assertiveness of freshmen or senior black women, Fleming reports that women at black college appear to lose assertive abilities by their senior years. Measures on black women in white colleges, on the other hand, revealed an enhanced social assertiveness. Thus, it

appears that the presence of males, in the predominately black colleges somehow discourages black female achievement. Fleming concludes that perhaps we need to explore conditions in which black women demonstrate enhanced academic confidence and social assertiveness.

Approaching the study of career choice from a slightly different perspective, Ann Burlew (1982) studied the backgrounds of black women pursuing traditional and non-traditional career choices. Her findings revealed that there were significant differences in two areas: the role models provided by their mothers and the early work experience of the black female. In other words, the educational achievement of mothers and the type of work in which they have been engaged were important, if not critical, background characteristics in the career choice of undergraduates. Furthermore, an early work experience may somehow provide exposure to role models and options. Burlew also concludes that there are attitudinal differences between those black women pursuing traditional careers and those pursuing non-traditional careers. Black women who tend to seek careers in traditional areas (social work and teaching) tend to be other oriented and gain satisfaction from helping others. Conversely, those seeking non-traditional careers are self-oriented; they consider their own needs as important as the needs of others, and they are seeking societal rewards and recognition.

The difficulty experienced in gathering material for this paper exemplifies the concerns of Scott, Stewart, Smith and others examining data on black women. The 1986 Annual Status Report, Minorities in Higher Education, issued by the Office of Minority Concerns of the American Council on Education presents, for the most part, general data on the educational status of blacks. Among other findings, the report reveals that:

- blacks received fewer bachelor's and master's degrees in 1984 than 1978.
- enrollments in traditionally black institutions peaked in 1980.
- at the doctoral level there was a slight increase in blacks and Asians between 1975 and 1984 (about 4.3 percent of the doctorates earned were to blacks in 1984; this compares with 3.9 in 1975. The highest concentration of degrees was in education.)
- low-income students enrolling in college in 1985 experienced more financial difficulty than those enrolling in 1978 due to lowered family income, higher tuition and reduction in federal student aid.

The 1985 Equality and Excellence: The Educational Status of Black Americans reports similiar findings to the ACE report and includes data on black women. According to the College Board, black women have increased their share of degrees at all levels except at the masters. In 1980-81, the majority of black females received B.A. degrees in business, education or social science (Black males had a similar majority with 50 percent of the

degrees received in business.) Black women also accounted for the increases in doctoral and professional degrees. (There was an increase in doctorates by 29 percent and an increase of 71 percent in professional degrees.) For black men, there was a 10 percent decrease in doctorates and a 12 percent decrease in professional degrees. Both the American Council on Education and the College Board conclude that blacks have failed to reach enrollment in higher education proportional to their numbers in the general American population.

This lack of proportional representation would tend to support findings that black women feel isolated in higher education. This isolation of black women extends from undergraduate to professional experiences. Constance Carroll (1982) states:

> Black women in higher education are isolated, under utilized and often demoralized. They note the efforts made to provide equal opportunities for black men and white women in higher education, while they somehow are left behind in the work of both the black and feminist movements (115).

Reviewing institutions' responses to the black movement and the women's movement, Carroll affirms that institutions of higher education have often pitted the two groups against each other. Moreover, she affirms that unless the black women acts as a bridge between the two groups, pricking the consciousness of each, they will be overlooked by the black movement and ignored by the women's movement.

The 1983 EEO data reveal that the number of blacks in faculty positions has decreased. The slight increase of blacks teaching in two year (private and public) colleges does not offset the minimum representation at the four-year level. In administrative positions, blacks increased their representation by a slight .2 in 1983 (from 7 to 7.2 percent). On the presence of blacks in higher education, in faculty or administrative positions, the American Council on Education concludes that:

> As blacks are losing ground in full-time teaching positions in the majority of the states, little effort is being made to increase the number of black doctorates. If this process is not reversed, it will only be a matter of time before we see a ripple effect in their participation in faculty and administration (15).

In a chapter entitled, "The Black Woman in Higher Education," William Moore and Lonnie Wagstaff (1974) provided an overview of the contributions, problems enountered by, and role of the professional black women in higher education. Moore and Wagstaff, for example, credit Ruth M. Harris, a former president of Stowe Teachers College (in St. Louis, Missouri), with the development of a traditional, but effective English workshop class designed to prepare students to perform college work. Commenting on the research on black women in higher education, Moore and Wagstaff state:

> Victimized by such scholarly neglect, black women are discussed and written about only in the context of the feminist and black movements and in affirmative action activities . . . The women's activist organization in academia, with their voluminous research, their spate of publications and their hundreds of cases against colleges and universities charging discrimination, have not isolated and dealt with the problems of black women in higher education... Most studies in higher education do not mention black women as academic professionals at all (161).

According to their data black women are at the bottom of the educational hierarchy subject to racial and sexual discrimination at all levels of academic life. The majority of black women faculty in senior colleges have little time, or gain little support, to engage in research. The majority of black women administrators are in urban insitutions; those in community colleges tend to see their jobs as dead end positions. Black women are underrepresented in community colleges and senior institution, and black women tend to serve as assistants to assistants. Without major changes in the enforcement of affirmative action, Moore and Wagstaff see black women in higher education as an endangered species - near extinction.

In "Racial Ideology and Intellectional Racism: Blacks in Academia," Robert Staples (1984), though not focusing specifically on black females, provides a stimulating discussion of the academic environment and practices that exclude most blacks seeking faculty appointments and administrative positions. Echoing the concerns of Constance Carroll, Moore and Wagstaff, Staples describes higher education as a politically based,

billion dollar industry geared towards maintaining the power, status, and money status quo of majority groups. Staples reports that black graduate students maintain formal relationships with white faculty and peers rarely participating in some aspects of the academic socialization process. This includes co-authoring papers, student teaching and obtaining academic positions. As a result of their somewhat formal relationships with faculty and some peers, black students often experience a lack of understanding and support. This lack of support places black graduate students at a disadvantage as they seek coveted academic positions.

With the exception of the 1969-1971 period in which black Ph.D.s were in great demand at majority white institutions, Staples reports that the percentage of black faculty has decreased at majority white institutions. He attributes this decline to the colleges' refusal to follow affirmative action, the lack of federal intervention, the ever present old boy hiring network, the hiring of blacks in non-traditional positions, and the insular, subjective tenure reviews (performed under the cloak of academic freedom). In terms of administrative positions, blacks often find themselves in highly visible positions that carry little power over academic programs. Staples concludes that "the university is one more monument to racial inequality that must be dismantled before the ideology of equal opportunity is a reality for all Americans" (16).

Other studies that focus on the performance of blacks (which do not specifically concentrate on black women) reveal that, in addition to the feelings of isolation, black professionals occasionally find themselves overburdened with several tasks. The conflict between scholarly pursuits and numerous committee tasks (often relating to minority topics) is further exasperated in the academic environment in which the rules of how to attain success (tenure and recognition) are somewhat obscure and not explicitly delineated. In "Afro-American Scholars in the University," Banks (1984) discusses how black faculty are often expected to perform quite differently from their white counterparts which includes responding to the legitimate, but time consuming, concerns of back students. He states, "in actuality few black scholars believed they were free simply to fulfill the expectations associated with traditional academic criteria" (329). Moreover, Banks affirms that many black faculty find themselves "vulnerable to insinuations that merit was not a main factor in their appointment" (333). Thus, black faculty face the pressures of isolation while attempting to adjust to conflicting roles, doubts and the somewhat obscure tenure requirements. The evaluation system is particularly a problem according to Exum et al (1984) in "Making it at the Top" because blacks, and other minorities, are not apart of the informal social groups in which peer feedback and recommendations can be gathered. Futhermore, the evaluation process, the authors

maintain is subjective, value-laden, traditional and deeply ingrained and un-examined by those adhering to it. (321). Banks maintains that being black and intellectual is a challenge in higher education.

Most of the recent research on black administrators in higher education does not specifically view the black female administrator. Robert Hoskins (1978) in his study of black administrators in land grant institutions, forcasts a dubious future for black women in higher education administration. Hoskins's data revealed that women held less than 30% of the administrative positions, and these positions were usually lower in the hierarchy than those of black males. Lea Williams (1986) in "Chief Academic Officers at Black Colleges and Universities" compared the characteristics of males and females holding the role of, or comparable ranks of, chief academic officer at 36 black colleges or universities. There were six such women in these positions. From her research and findings, it appears that a black woman chief academic officer (at a black college or university) would most likely be 1) paid lower than male counterparts, 2) promoted from within the institution, 3) slightly older than male counterparts, 4) more tenured, 5) single, 6) engaged in little scholarly writing, 7) a member of several professional organizations, 8) performing slightly different tasks than their male counterparts, and 9) not expecting to assume the college presidency as their next position.

Conclusion:

This review of the literature demonstrates the need for more research about, more theoretical construction by and about, black women in higher education as they enter institutions of higher education as undergraduates and attempt to pursue professional careers. Althea Smith and Abigail Stewart see the study of the black women's experience as pivotal to our understanding of racism and sexism. Staples perceives the college/university as a microcosm of the larger society; the rewards of tenure and recognition are not easily attained by black females or males. This review of the research also suggests that more analysis of the coping strategies and interactions of black women will enhance the development of this field of inquiry. Smith and Stewart call for analyses of the experiences of black woman that will highlight social interactions of black women exploring the complex interactions in different racial and sexual contexts.

What do we need to know about black women in higher education? Where does this review of the research lead us?

It is apparent that the study of black women in higher education has suffered from scholarly disinterest and from perspectives that are androcentric and or ethnocentric. There is a need for a continuous generation of paradigms, empirical testing of paradigms, and an examination of present paradigms to

determine how they illuminate, obscure or predict experiences of black women in different higher education milieus. Without this intellectual activity, black women will become invisible, isolated and powerless.

Considering the current status of black women, what can we do in the future to move towards the insights we need about black women in higher education? I recommend that we:

- participate in the generation of more knowledge about black women in higher eudcation
- examine studies already conducted focusing on the conceptual frameworks, assumptions of the researchers methodologies and conclusions
- produce more longitudiual studies that examine coping strategies and decision making processes of black women in higher education as they develop as faculty and administrators in diverse setting interacting with different groups
- form research partnerships with our peers to develop conceptual frameworks that will highlight what's happened in the research, what is happening to black women in higher education (as a group) and what will happen (given specific conditions)
- increase the degree of early intervention, mentoring, for younger black women as they enter high school and begin to develop career aspirations

Unless we as black women take an aggressive, unrelenting, lead in identifying who we are, we will continue to react to distortions and perceptions created by others. Mary Helen

Washington (1975), in her introduction to Black-Eyed Susans, states:

> People other than the black woman herself try to define who she is, what she is supposed to look like, act like, and sound like. And most of these creations bear very little resemblance to real, live black women (ix) .

Special thanks to my graduate assistant, Ernie Sandifer-Huff and my secretary, Stacey Mitchell.

Bibliography

American, Council on Education. Minorities in Higher Education. Fifth Annual Status Report. 1986

American Council on Education. Women Presidents Double in Number, Higher Education and National Affairs. Vol 16, September 2, 1985

Banks, William M. Afro-American Scholars in the University. American Behavioral Scientist. Vol. 27 No.3, January/February 1984, pp. 325-338

Black-Eyed-Susans ed. Mary Helen Washington. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1975

Benjamin, Lois. Black Women Achievers: An Isolated Elite. Sociological Inquiry. Vol 52, No 2, Spring 1982, pp. 141-149

Burlew, Ann Kathleen. The Experiences of Black Females in Traditional and Non-Traditional Professions. Psychology of Women Quarterly. Vol 6, No 3, Spring 1982, pp. 312-325

Carroll, Cons[illegible]ce. Three's a Crowd: The Dilemma of the Black Women in Higher Education. But Some Of Us Are Brave. Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press, 1982

Chisholm, Shirley. Racism and Anti-Feminism . The Black Scholar. September-October 1983, pp. 2-7

The College Board. Equality and Excellence: The Educational Status of Black Americans. New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1985

Epstein, Cynthia F. Positive Effects of the Multiple Negative: Explaining The Success of Black Professional Women. Changing Women In A Changing Society. ed. Joan Huber. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1973, pp.151-173

Exum, William H., Robert J. Menges, Bari Watkins, and Patricia Berglund. Making It at the Top. American Behavioral Scientist. Vol 27, No 3, January/February 1984, pp. 301-324

Fleming, Jacqueline. Black Women in Black and White College Environments: The Making of a Matriarch. Journal of Social Issues. Vol 39, No 3, 1983, pp. 41-54

Green, Robert. The Challenge for Change in Higher Education for Blacks. The Crisis. Vol 85, No 5, May, 1982, pp. 6-7

Higginbotham, Elizabeth. Two Representative Issues in Contemporary Sociological Work on Black Women. But Some of Us are Brave. Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press, 1982

Hood, Elizabeth. Black Women, White Women: Separate Paths to Liberation. The Black Scholar. September-October 1983, pp. 26-36

Hoskins, Robert L. Black Administrators in Higher Education: Conditions and Perceptions. New York, Praeger Publishers, Praeger Special Studies, 1978

Hull, Gloria, and Barbara Smith. The Politics of Black Women's Studies: Introduction. But Some Of Us Are Brave. Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press, 1982

Jewell, Sue K. Will the Real Black, Afro-American, Mixed, Colored, Negro Please Stand Up? Journal of Black Studies, Vol 16, No 1, September 1985, pp. 57-73

Kimmons, Willie. Black Administrators in Public Community Colleges. New York: Carlton Press, Inc. 1977

Lykes, M. Brinton. Discrimination and Coping in the Lives of Black Women: Analyses of Oral History Data. Journal of Social Issues, Vol 39, No 3, 1983 pp. 79-100

Moore, Jr. William and Lonnie Wagstaff. Black Educators in White Colleges. San Fransciso: Jossey-Bass Publ., 1974

Perkins, Linda M. The Impact of the "Cult of True Womanhood" on the Education of Black Women. Journal of Social Issues. Vol 39, No 3, 1983 pp. 17-27

Scott, Patricia Bell. Debunking Sapphire: Toward a Non-Racist and Non-Sexist Social Science. But Some Of Us Are Brave. Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press, 1982

Smith, Althea and Abigail Stewart. Approaches to Studying Racism and Sexism in Black Women's Lives. Journal of Social Issues. Vol 39, No 3, 1983 pp. 1-15

Smith, Elsie J. The Black Female Adolescent: A Review of the Educational, Career, and Psychological Literature. Psychology of Women Quarterly. Vol 6, No 3, Spring 1982,

Staples, Robert. Racial Ideology And Intellectual Racism: Blacks in Academia. The Black Scholar. Vol 15, 1984, pp. 2-17

Williams, Lea E. Chief Academic Officers at Black College and Universities: A Comparison by Gender. Journal of Negro Education. Vol 55, No 4, 1986

Williams, Ora. American Black Women in the Arts and Social Sciences. Metuchen, New York: The Scarecrow Press, 1978